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**Awakening of racial awareness in *The Secret Life of*
Bees by Sue Monk Kidd.**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

During the Civil Rights Movement constitutional changes were made and for the first time in US history, some white citizens acknowledged their racism. I argue this process is called “awakening of racial awareness”. Lily Owens illustrates such change in Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*. She finds out her engrained racism through meeting the Other. There are two transforming factors; the ineffective Act of 1964 and the meaning of having white and black skin. The methods used are a close reading and a focus on gender. In addition, as the novel is a Bildungsroman, Lily changes her perspective on society in her process of maturation.

The second part of the analysis deals with the Black Madonna. It is the bridge between the awakening process and the conclusion of the novel of formation. I include a revision of the ethnic origins of Christianity and the implications of a dark-skinned Mary. Religion heals Lily’s emotional wounds and provides several motherly figures. Her perspective on different social unfair situations raises questions of theology, gender inequality, and social issues.

Keywords: *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd, Civil Rights, Bildungsroman, Black Madonna, gender studies.

0. Introduction

The era of the mid-fifties and sixties in the United States were key in social culture and in national history. Two legal events brought significant societal changes: *Board v. Brown of Topeka* in 1954 and the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964. Through the racial fight, some white citizens acknowledged their engrained racism. I argue such process is an “awakening of racial awareness”. In other words, they stopped seeing African Americans as second-class citizens. It is important to remark the majority of the white South did not agree with progressive fights.

Contemporary literature of social protest acknowledges the past activism to create an ancestry for such rights (Trodd 2015). The present work is based on the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, placed in the Civil Rights Movement in the American South. The main character, Lily Owens, is a white fourteen-year-old girl. She experiences a state of liminality while undergoing a personal journey. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate Lily as the reflection of the racial awakening. In a way, she mirrors the small percentage of the white South who also faced the same experience. She goes from acknowledging her prejudices to embracing the Other’s lifestyle.

The methods I will apply are close reading and a focus on gender. The novel falls in the Bildungsroman category successfully due to her age and especially her gender. As a young adult she tries to crack social norms and will fully understand them by being a guest in the Other’s community. Gender plays an important role because it provides a connection with religion. She spiritually connects with the Black Madonna as a wounded female rejected by society. In this setting, the Boatwright sisters take the role of mentors to instruct her about racism and their Marian cult. The representation of a dark-skinned Mary of Nazareth is the fundamental bridge to shift Lily’s perspective about racism. African Americans have their own Christian legacy, and Mary’s role has a link to

motherhood, the figure Lily needs the most. The main objectives of this work consist of filling the gap in literature about the racial awakening. In addition, I want to bring attention to figures as the Black Madonna which need more academic research. For those readers not acquainted with the novel, I suggest going to page 29. I have included a plot summary which includes information about the main characters.

1. The novel in the Sixties

The plot cannot be taken out of its historical context because it would devalue the main character's personal journey. Due to this reason I am going to mention two crucial legal actions in this era. The first one is the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* of 1954 and its significance in both legal and social areas in connection with Zachary Taylor. The second case is the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964. However, I will only mention here the legal issues. In section two I will develop its visible social implications in the novel.

1.1. Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954

As Duignan (2020a) says, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filled four class-action lawsuits. The association demanded the admission of African Americans students into white schools because such facilities presented a better quality in all areas. The U.S Supreme Court ruled racial segregation as unconstitutional by the Fourteenth Amendment, as it violated the grant of equal protection. The victory ended the doctrine of “separate but equal” used in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. It justified similarly equal facilities would not transgress the equal protection clause (Duignan 2020b). The doctrine of this nature ensured citizens with

African heritage would persist in a legally segregated and unequal environment to keep them in degradation and servitude (Davis 2003). The main services provided by the public spaces guaranteed their lifestyle remained the same. Hence, the only option to upgrade their social condition was through education.

In this novel, Zachary Taylor is a young aspiring student of law. He is the person responsible for the transportation of August's honey jars. When he met Lily for the first time, a distinction between education and class was made. He is the son of a working-class single mother and also a student at a black high school (Kidd, 2003: 145). In contrast, Lily attends a white school and her father is a middle-class businessman. Eventually, Zachary becomes the first African American admitted into a white school in their city and he is considered a model for others to follow (Kidd: 350).

Zachary gets irritated by Lily's suggestion about him becoming a professional athlete (Kidd: 150). The proposal comes from the stereotype that African Americans are only good at sports. Even though the novel is set ten years later after *Brown v. Board*, Kidd illustrates the American South as a place for segregated education. "In 1965 it appeared that the number of black children in desegregated schools was double that of 1964— but this was still only 2.5 per cent of the eligible black students in the eleven states of the South" (Marwick, 2012: 516). Zachary wonders if he has a future because of his physical looks (Kidd: 150). The only access to upward mobility goes through education. He accepts he will have to study harder than his fellow white students and longer, since a Juris Doctor need more higher education than most professions. In his time, an example that caused riots was James Meredith. In 1962 he was the first African American student to be admitted to the University of Mississippi (Verney 2000). Moreover, once they achieved an education finding a well-paid job seemed impossible. When August graduated from college, she got rejected from every job she applied to due

to her position in the social hierarchy. She had to settle down as a housekeeper until she could teach (Kidd: 180). In contrast, Lily finds it shocking to compare the intellect African Americans' may have compared to her own (Kidd: 145). She compares beauty school, her future plans, to Zachary's law school because students that looked like him did not represent even half of higher education alumni.

1.2. The Civils Rights Act of 1964

According to Wallenfeldt (2020), this Act passed on July 2nd, 1964. It ended ending discrimination based on race, colour, religion, or national origin. It grants equal voting rights by removing registration requirements and procedures biased against minorities and prohibits segregation or discrimination in public spaces. However, it took a long way to achieve such victory: in 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment granted “equal protection” to all citizens, in 1870 The Fifteenth Amendment gave African American men's right to vote, and the Nineteenth to women in 1920. Lastly, the Civil Rights Act of 1875 prohibits discrimination in public transportation, accommodations, and jury selection (Armstrong 2015).

After the Act of 1964 segregation was still visible in real life events. Charles and Barbara Whalen (1985) argue three reasons why it took 175 years to illegalize racial discrimination. First, a Constitution protecting the interests of states. Secondly, “individual voters can select only one percent of the Senate and less than one-fourth of one percent of the House of Representatives” (Whalen: 230). In addition, the strategy to keep a political party in power meant supporting the ideals of the majority of the nation:

Legislators (...) elected initially because they were leaders of the people at home (...). [They follow] an age-old formula for political success: keep the folks back home happy; don't get them mad (...). [Also, they avoided] proposals that may offend a significant number of constituents (In 1964 this effectively muted the 52.4 percent of black Americans who lived in the South, where politicians dared not offend the white majority by appearing "soft on niggers" (Whalen: 231).

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the nation felt an uncertainty on whether the Act would be approved or not. Nevertheless, the Johnson Administration approved it and they also abolished the poll tax, originally designed to hinder African Americans from voting after the Reconstruction period (Armstrong: 17).

2. Lily's awakening of racial awareness.

Literature of social protest critiques society and suggests a solution to its ills, by empathy, shock value and symbolic action (Stauffer 2006, cited in Trodd 2015:19). The following second part deals with: the beginning of Lily's process of maturation, the ineffective power of the Act of 1964, and the social meaning behind black and white skin. These crucial aspects made Lily perceive her own racism.

"At night I (...) watch the show, how bees squeezed through the cracks of my bedroom wall (...) a high-pitched zzzzzz that hummed along my skin. I (...) felt the longing build in my chest" (Kidd: 1). The *longing* she builds manifest her desire to flee reality. The first words of the novel introduce a symbolic guide; the bees. They metaphorically encourage Lily to meet the Boatwright sisters. Rajendran (2018) believes bees are symbols for rebirth, search and personal growth. Along the same lines, she imagines the bees offering her honey to taste (Kidd: 1). Throughout the novel, *honey* has several different meanings. The most significant one for her would mean as a healing

medicine. In this passage, by tasting honey, she decides to initiate a healthy personal journey to process her emotional wounds.

In chapter two, Lily hears a voice calling her name (Kidd: 52). Through mystical instances in the narrative, it dawns on Lily only she has to power of her destiny. Religion plays a crucial segment of the plot, developed in section three. Yet, she needs a clear instruction from anywhere, a voice within an epiphany, to set the narrative action going.

2.1. The Civils Rights Act in social situations

Purposefully, the reader notices Lily is fourteen years old (Kidd: 2). As Moretti (1987) says, what is appealing about Wilhelm Meister is his youth, an age which holds the “meaning of life”. In her maturity phase, she questions the concept of *normality*. Its meaning relies on what is excluded from society, thus deconstructing the main character world’s social order (Moretti: 11). In other words, Lily will understand segregation is considered *normal* through the ineffective use of the Act of 1964. The first event that shifts her mind is witnessing Rosaleen’s registering to vote. A man in the street saw her and said, “Where’re you going, nigger?” We walked, and the men pushed back their makeshift table and came right down to the curb to wait for us, like they were spectators at a parade and we were the prize float” (Kidd: 39). After Rosaleen emptied the contents of her snuff jug on the men’s shoes, she is violently hit as blood ran from a cut beneath her eye (Kidd: 40). She gets charged with assault, theft, and disturbing the peace in contrast with Lily set free after calling her father (Kidd: 40-41). This difference in justice treatment does not rely on their age alone; Zachary was arrested, and he is around Lily’s age. Neither does gender seem to play a factor because Rosaleen is physically assaulted

anyway (Kidd: 58). She had no chance to defend herself or have a fast and fair trial. Due to her colour her human rights are immediately ignored.

Even though Lily gets mad, she does not understand why Rosaleen would not apologize to her aggressor (Kidd: 58). She cannot discern the social meaning behind Rosaleen's submission. Apologizing to white supremacists implies a significant meaning to a woman with slave-ancestry. It takes a moment for Lily to accept her housekeeper's fate due to racial hate. She realizes one of the aggressors may end Rosaleen's life when T. Ray says it aloud (Kidd: 48). After concluding only she could save her, she illegally helps her escape the hospital (Kidd: 59).

Chatagnier (2014) says the meaning of *Bildungsroman* has changed overtime, but the essence of a "learning journey" has prevailed, specially aided by external notions. Lily needs to leave her world, the peach farm, in order to grow. While walking in the road, she believes they can find somewhere to eat and sleep (Kidd: 74). Rosaleen smiles at her naiveté and says no one will welcome her as a guest (Kidd: 75). Lily questions the objective of the Act, whether its goal meant society would not treat Rosaleen as a second-class citizen (Kidd: 75). The housekeeper agrees but explains people will change their mind only if they are forced to (Kidd: 75). Certainly, she was right because a newspaper claimed a motel closed down rather than refuse segregation (Kidd: 82). In chapter five, Lily eavesdrops a conversation between June and August. June insists Rosaleen and Lily lied about their situation and August replies that if they do not welcome them, no one will (Kidd: 106). One of the first lessons in Lily's journey deals with the lack of humanity surrounding race. Hospitality depends on the physical looks of the guests. Even if the hosts are African Americans, they may refuse to welcome white individuals due to how society will respond to it. By the same token, she understands society has a period of

adaptation with legal actions. When the Supreme Court, in this case, approves an Act does not mean people will promptly change their minds on that specific issue.

In chapter nine, Zachary's arrest forces Lily to comprehend racial profiling. He was in the street with two friends near a cinema where Jack Palance, a movie actor, allegedly was going to come with an African American woman. Jackson, one of the boys ridiculed a white man because he believed the rumor. Then, the man went angrily towards them and made up a story that Jackson broke his nose. The crowd around wanted the boy responsible to come forward but the three of them covered for each other. The police arrested them, and they spent five days in jail because the local judge was on vacation (Kidd: 222-223). When Zachary came back, he was skinnier (Kidd: 252). The main character considers the situation went to extreme lengths by witnessing the scene. She thought the police having the siren and the red light in the car was unnecessary (Kidd: 223). It resembled a spectacle in the street, similarly to Rosaleen's attempt to vote. Lily tried not to break down because Zachary was going to be held for too long (Kidd: 225). Even she recognizes five days in jail for public disorder of this type is unnecessary and unfair.

2.2. Realization of whiteness and blackness

After seeing how ineffective the Act of 1964 was in social situations, Lily still has to acknowledge what it means to have black or white skin. She does not know its meaning in a social context. The process goes from hearing about unfair actions due to racism, to develop a conscience of her own whiteness in comparison to Rosaleen, June and Zachary's blackness.

At first, she knows about Rosaleen's skin colour as a mere physical description (Kidd: 2). Lily knows society does not accept interracial marriage in any circumstance. She used to have dreams about a white wife Rosaleen of T. Ray, so she could have a real mother. Other times she would dream about being "an adopted Negro orphan", or they would live in another State to keep their natural colour (Kidd: 15). Throughout the novel the reader can observe many of Lily's fantasies. The thought of an interracial marriage as one makes remembrance of how marriage and mixed children faced so much criticism. The Supreme Court overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* quite late in history, in a genetically diverse society (not purely white). Yet, by the 1964 the negative connotations of mixing races prevailed in the consciousness of individuals.

"Staying in a colored house with colored women (...) not something I was against, but I was brand-new to it, and my skin had never felt so white to me" (Kidd: 97). The Boatwright sisters' household, the Pink House, became her new space. A new concept of adaptation comes with living with them. Morrison (2014) holds *pink* a stereotypical-girl colour, also the one for female genitalia and life-sustaining womb. She also considers May, June, August, Lily and Rosaleen as names of life, linked with pollination and fertilization which represents the characters as working women (symbolically working bees). I agree with Rajendran (2018) when she analyzes that each

character has a role a bee would perform in a beehive. In this context, the main character represents the wounded and weak one. Thus, Lily is metaphorically saved because of new motherly figures, as bees would save a dying member. Brown (2002) mentions the sisters serve maternal nurturance and emotional education for Lily, and a comfortable community for Rosaleen. In section three, I will analyze who represents the queen bee.

June disrupts the harmony of the plot. She is the character who on many occasions excludes Lily due to her whiteness. The main character becomes the minority or the Other.

“‘But she’s white, August.’ This was a great revelation – not that I was white but that it seemed like June might not want me here because of my skin color. I hadn’t known this was possible – to reject people for being white. A hot wave passed through my body. ‘Righteous indignation’ is what Brother Gerald called it. (...) There was no difference between my piss and June’s” (Kidd: 107-8).

Until then, Lily could not fathom the existence of racism from African Americans to Caucasians. Also, she deconstructs racism as a failed ideology. While watching television with the rest of them, she feels ashamed of her whiteness (Kidd: 109). I believe she is ashamed of what white supremacists are capable of doing. She represents the white race in the Boatwright home. Even though she does not take part in their hate, a feeling of guilt overcomes her. Probably such sensation comes from what she may have thought in the past or comments she made in a mild racist tone. When Lily heard about the Jack Palance rumor, she had enough of hearing about racial hate (Kidd: 192-193). However, the importance of looking differently crossed her mind for the first time.

The reader can perceive Lily’s only contact to any African American is Rosaleen. Her social circles include a white school and a white church. She regarded the Other as a different species until she saw how June blushed because she will not marry Neil (Kidd: 130). The fact that Lily finds June’s blushing shocking reveals how much she ignores about non-white individuals. An effective way of tackling a significant issue as racism is

getting to know the Other. The differences between them and the Self (the group that forms the majority of a nation here) rely on the created perceptions about each other, rather than on actual differences.

Lily does not understand why June is uncomfortable having a white guest (Kidd: 148). Another main lesson for her is perceiving the South as a segregated territory, especially in social events. Thus, a white young girl living with older African American women as their protégées is an unusual event and prone to backlash. Consequently, Zachary questions her stay (Kid: 146) and it elevates June's continual resentment towards her. Even after May's suicide, the police officer expresses his concerns about this living situation. He questions whether she is an orphan and if she did not have any white people to stay with (Kidd: 242-245). Lily notices how she, instead of the actual tragedy, has become the focus of attention (Kidd: 245). However, his advice is that someone picks her up because living with the sisters means lowering her social position (Kidd: 246).

Lastly, Zachary's love interest challenges Lily's opinion about interracial affairs. When they first met, she realized beauty is not exclusively white (Kidd: 145). Now she does not daydream about T. Ray and Rosaleen, this time is about her and Zachary. She daydreams about the two of them as a couple (Kidd: 154). The thought of having an affair with an African American plays havoc with her relationships' view. "It was foolish (..) being attracted to Negroes. I'd honestly thought such a thing couldn't happen (...) Or maybe [the] desire kicked in when it pleased without noticing the rules we lived and died by" (Kidd: 56). She regards her attraction appalling, but also questions if it is natural to feel such in such a way. It was an obvious thought to regard interracial couples as deviants.

3. The Marian Cult

The Marian Cult has a double fold importance in the plot. It consists of bridging Lily's awakening with her process of maturation. Mary is narrated from the African American tradition as "The Mother of Chains". Her figure changes Lily's perspective about Christianity's ethnic legacy. Moreover, the Black Madonna will replace the mother she has been looking for since her biological mother passed away.

The American South is mostly formed by the Baptist church. Kidd's use of Catholic theology comes from the difference between the Protestant Mary and the Catholic one. In most Christian divisions, the former considers Mary as the mother of Christ only and in the latter, Mary has a type of godly status hence, a special a worship. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council reinstated the Marian position within the Catholic dogma (Hall 2017). The scholars in charge of establishing Mary's titles agreed on the following topics: "Mary's immaculate conception, assumption into heaven, perpetual virginity, queenship of heaven and the Church (...) and Mary as "Mediatatrix"" (Hall: 35). The prominent factor was elevating Mary as queen, so she could reinforce reverence and obedience to women in the theocracy already present in Rome (Warner 1976, cited in Hall 2017: 33). Another title of Mary is *Theotokos*, the mother of God or God-bearer.

After a brief Mariology context, the novel provides many references supporting said theology. Lily's comes from a Baptist church (Kidd: 9), and because she does not practice the sign of the cross, she does not remember the proper steps (Kidd: 204). August teaches her their honey cakes are for Mary, the Queen of Heaven (Kidd: 279). As Schlumpf (2003) visualizes, Mary's womb is the hive from which Christ the honey flows. Symbolically, the queen bee represents Mary's royalty status as the mother of thousands (Kidd: 186).

Early Christian literature used the beehive as the template of an integrated, orderly community (Rajendran 2018). Every Sunday, the Daughters of Mary hold a service to the Black Madonna (Kidd: 131). During their weekly reunion, the congregation goes over the Magnificat (Kidd: 133). It is a hymn about the conception of Christ which raises Mary and her community from their low social position (Hall 2017). In the feast of the Assumption of Mary, each member takes a piece of cake which is a substitute for the sacramental bread. The one in charge of providing the piece says it is the “body of the Blessed Mother” (Kidd: 279).

3.1. Mother of Chains

As said before, the African American tradition has its own version of Mary of Nazareth. She has dark skin and is commonly known as a Black Madonna. They are paintings or statues located around the globe, especially in Europe. The best known is the Black Madonna of Czestochowa, a painting by Luke the Evangelist. Eventually its icon became the protector of Poland and her physical representation includes both dark-skinned queen Mary and baby Jesus Christ.

In the novel, the Black Madonna has several meanings: the honey label, the statue of Mary, August, the female congregation and the “mother within us” (Schlumpf 2003): “Wilhelm Meister is the most necessary character, but not the most important” (Moretti: 20). Lily’s liminality requires a process of development. However, in this case who guides the Wilhelm Meister is the wise, life-experienced older woman. Thus, as in a traditional Bildungsroman, August becomes the most important character by carrying significant elements of the narrative.

In this section, she introduces a dark Mary to Lily for the first time. History would have been different for the oppressed non-white ethnic groups to have a dark Mary as Theotokos. The white tradition of Christianity offers little space for a Black Madonna. However, we find some examples as the Virgin of Montserrat (Catalonia) and Our Lady of Peña de Francia (Salamanca). The statue of Our Lady of Chartres (France) is an example in the Celtic tradition. Probably the Christian Black Madonna came from pagan worship. Kidd points out how religion has left the traditional feminine traits of God. Consequently, specific left-out images make society less inclusive which is ironic since God embraces everyone (Schlumpf 2003). Buell (2008) recalls the first interpretations of Christian ethnic origins in the 19th century: Jesus was wrongly theorized as an Aryan Jew and the Pharisees as Semitic Jews. She also states the failure of universal Christianity “citizenship” of the New Testament as a way to solve racism. The figure of Mary, specifically, has and still is represented as a white woman, which is questionable if the historical Mary probably originated from Judea (Hall: 121). Nowadays, we found the region of Judea in modern-day south Israel in the Middle East.

When the Daughters of Mary looked at the Black Madonna for the first time, they thought the divine could also come in dark skin (Kidd: 175). One important change in the late fifties onwards is the notion of beauty detached from class and gender; “*Ebony* magazine carried a large number of advertisements featuring black models; also (...) hair-straighteners, skin-whiteners, and many other beauty aids designed to help blacks look as much like whites as possible” (Marwick, 2012: 374). Marwick concludes the traditional beauty standard consisted in appearing as white as possible. Therefore, until the modern mass production of cosmetology, beauty had no link with the African American community. This issue arises several questions; First, beauty can offer several values to an individual as worth and self-love. Those values were not available to minorities then,

so a certain state of mind is inherited from past generations. Secondly, colorism had a prominent effect in sixties. For African Americans, those who had natural light skin (not dark but not white either) meant higher probabilities of finding employment, in contrast with their darker fellow citizens.

The Black Madonna of the novel is the Mother of Chains. She is a black wooden statue with one arm raised with a heart and a moon on her breast (Kidd: 87). The figure embodies the second part of Lily's journey. When Lily sets foot in the Pink House, she felt a trembling feeling through her body (Kidd: 86) and an aching magnetic sensation in her chest (Kidd: 87). Later on, she confesses to August she never thought Mary as coloured until she saw the honey label (Kidd: 172). The main character has a familiarity with a white Mary due to the media and the ethnic legacy of religion.

As new members of the cult, Lily and Rosaleen need to learn about the story of *Our Lady of Chains*. It was transmitted orally through generations (Kidd: 11) in the same way the statue of Mary came into the possession of Big Mama's (the sister's grandmother) after the Civil War (Kidd: 177). During slavery, a slave named Obadiah found a wooden figure of a woman in the Ashley river. She was placed in a prayer house because she would fill the hearts of slaves by encouraging them to escape. The slave owner found out and chained her in a carriage house. However, she escaped and went back to the praying house (Kidd: 133-37).

The Mother of Chains has its roots in slavery. In particular, motherhood is a complex and controversial segment ignored by the grand narrative of history. Oftentimes the number of slaves would increase by slave owners taking advantage of women slaves. Therefore, mothers were forced to give away their children because they were part of the stock. Even some slave mothers were considered "wet nurses" for white infants until no longer needed. The pain these women had to endure is often linked to the *Stabat Mater*

Dolorosa; A 13th century hymn by allegedly Italian poet Jacopone Da Todi and its inspiration comes from Simeon's prophecy (Martin 2016). The message foreshadows a sword piercing Mary's heart when she would see Jesus at the cross. Mary turns pain and contempt into maternal grace, because her Son's loss by a society's system is a shared experience in the African American motherhood (Hall: 86). The *Mater Dolorosa* in this context embodies a figure of hope, grace and love to a group that has been perpetually oppressed. Through faith, the access of Mary's comfort is available to anyone who asks for it.

Shifting back to the novel, the Lady is always a deliverer from bondage. The mystical element of their cult includes a mixture of ancient African religions and Christianity (Kidd: 176). The first part of the novel mentions Rosaleen's religion made up of Christian traits, nature and ancestor worship as well (Kidd: 36). Such passages give the reader a sense of tradition. Particularly, how the African American's faith tradition had to reinvent itself with figures of hope and love. Slaves had to forcefully follow Christianity's teachings but in their hearts they still wanted to preserve what their ancestors worshipped.

3.2. Lily's motherhood void

“The hero of the classical Bildungsroman (...) wants to find his place in the world (...) and seeks after a life which is reasonable for him” (Moretti: 35). Lily's analysis cannot end until she replaces her motherhood void with a motherly figure. It is a pivotal point in her development of individualization. Since her mother passed away, she always felt an emptiness. The present segment deals with her trauma, her void, the motherly figures she has found and lastly, her much needed fulfillment.

The only memory of her mother is her passing away (Kidd: 8). Lily's belief that she accidentally killed her mother produced a trauma. The reader can perceive such effect when she runs away frequently from the peach farm. Until then, Lily only found happiness outside her home (Kidd: 28). She stretches out among fallen peaches and feels a mystical sensation (Kidd: 28). Liptak (2010) offers an explanation for running away to the natural world; Lily welcomes nature when she feels deprived of love, it temporarily calms her cravings for physical and emotional warmth. During night-time (Kidd: 121) her void would worsen as she would long for her mother even more. Usually at night the human being tends the feeling of loneliness more aggravated, but she does not take action to get over her trauma. Her running away can be considered just a defense mechanism.

Secondly, she confesses imagining herself dying and going to heaven. She would meet her mother and would comfort her for the first ten thousand years (Kidd: 3). A quite noteworthy feeling of guilt stands out through the novel. Moreover, she feels society's rejection due to her condition as half orphan. She was denied the entrance at the Women's Club because she did not have a mother to present her with a rose (Kidd: 11). The beginning of the novel offers a comparison between Lily and Mary, in age and in epiphany: "The bees came (...) the summer I turned fourteen (...) [they] were sent to me (...) like the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary (...) it is presumptuous to compare my small life to hers" (Kidd: 2). She is narrating from a flashback, so the reader does not know why Mary is mentioned early on. If Lily feels rejected by society, she will have a tendency to identify with Mary in an easier way. She will feel a stronger connection due to her past rejection because the mother of Christ faced the same experience too. Mary was an unmarried pregnant young woman who hid in her cousin's home. Lily is a half orphan young girl hiding in the Pink House.

The only motherly figure she has known is Rosaleen (Kidd: 2). The responsibilities of her job, cooking and cleaning, show the traditional behavior of a mother but Lily refers to her as her 'stand-in mother' (Kidd: 2). However, the housekeeper somehow does not fit completely as a mother. Lily is indirectly screaming for love; she wants August to love her and keep her forever (Kidd: 116).

Lily's psyche remains the same until she meets the *Mother of Chains*: "I wanted to cry, but then, in the next instant, I wanted to laugh, because the statue also made me feel like Lily the Smiled-Upon, like there was goodness and beauty in me" (Kidd: 88). When there is a feminine image of God, women are able to empower themselves psychologically and spiritually (Schlumpf 2003). Lily acquires the maturation values: freedom, happiness, identity, change and security (Moretti 1987) through the Black Madonna. The Lady of Chains does not have the submission of white Mary. In contrast, she has her fist raised up and possesses a strong character. Lily says she is the mother of thousands (Kidd: 204). Mary fulfills her motherhood void, replacing the biological mother she never had, and she provides healing for her through love.

In chapter fourteen, Lily steps in the honey house and sees the "eighth wonder" of the world; the cluster of beehives in the morning. She hears a humming sound that elevates her at the center of the universe (Kidd: 354). Morrison (2014) notices this sound is the "AUM". It can be defined as a connecting sound between individuals and the universe, considered the peak experience of all and what would be call "the immortal" (Campbell 1991, cited in Morrison 2014: 65). Lastly, religion provides her with a feeling of contentment after preserving the Black Madonna in honey (Kidd: 336). I assume by this point in the narrative Lily has found purpose in life and a religious calling which empowers her to face the darkness of life confidently. As mentioned before, she did not

take action to deal with her trauma. Thus, the figure of Mary changed her interior to find healing.

4. Closure

“A big part of me still felt dead as a doornail” (Kidd: 337). Even though Lily’s void is fulfilled, her maturation experience is not over yet. She still needs to understand what happened to both her parents and forgive them to move on. The complete closure of this sole act will shift her perception of gender roles. Thus, this is the last segment of her personal journey. A Bildungsroman novel ends with the main character having a different perspective on society. Along the same lines, it usually ends in marriage which is not the case in this story. However, a social pact is visible at the end of the plot. Otherwise, a satisfactory ending would be lacking in the narrative. In addition, the conclusion of this present work’s thesis is fully developed alongside the closure of the narrative. I had taken angles from politics to further explain why the South had a hard time accepting equality.

4.1. The Owens

In the middle of her existential crisis, Lily decides to open up about her mother to August. However, August confesses she knew Deborah Owens because she was her housekeeper as a child (Kidd: 293). This is the reason why Deborah had written the name of August’s city at the back of a photograph, the one Lily followed to have answers. When August saw Lily for the first time, she assumed Deborah’s daughter was in front of her and decided to welcome her as a guest. The story of the mother is even more tragic than Lily’s. When Deborah became an adult, she met T. Ray and decided to get married due

to her unexpected pregnancy, not because she desired commitment (Kid: 207-208). A few months later, Deborah asked August to stay in her home, as she planned to leave her husband. Lily asks why her mother did not bring her too, so August teaches her that depressed individuals behave differently (Kidd: 313). The main character cannot perceive the difference between sadness and depression. Her narrow perception leads her to get angry at her late mother for leaving her behind. It takes her a while to understand Deborah was probably going through postpartum depression and needed healing to take care of her daughter.

Lily does not want to see her reflection in a mirror because she resembles her mother (Kidd: 339) Such anger is the evidence of her deep resentment. She created a fantasy in her mind, a mother that never existed to comfort her when she felt alone. The real Deborah Owens does not meet her expectations. “I’d spent my life imagining all the ways she’d loved me, what a perfect specimen of a mother she was. And all of it was lies. I had completely made her up” (Kidd: 311-312). The possible meaning behind the continuous creation of an alternative reality is a desire for a hero. Indirectly, she wants a savior to rescue her from her abusive home and to provide her with the affection she never received.

In due time, Lily learns through August and Deborah’s life choices that not all women desire motherhood and marriage; she challenges the role of women in the family space (Liptak: 2010). Lily is perplexed to know some women do not pursue traditional paths. If they did, society expected certain behavior of a wife and a mother. Deborah Owens fails as both but eventually Lily concludes her mother was mentally unstable and decides to forgive her (Kidd: 34). After reading a poem that her mother used to read, Lily sees Deborah as a person who suffer abundantly, and could not properly take care of her child.

In Lily's own words, she recognizes forgiving is hard (Kidd: 344). Yet, the most difficult process for her is forgiving her father. She describes him as a "despicable, angry, dud of a father, disappointment, yoke around [her] neck" (Kidd: 202). His parenting consists of physical punishments and never showing any act of affection. After Lily confronts him when he finds her, it dawns on her how Deborah's leaving may have affected him (Kidd: 363). The villains of a story should add to the plot presenting another side of human complexity. Their purpose in a narrative should not be focus on only aggravating the destiny of the main character. What the narrative voice implies throughout the story is that T. Ray presented a different mental health after coming back from the war. Probably, he suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which symptoms include irritability. Deborah could not handle his attitude on top of dealing with her own mental state. Therefore, her abandoning their marriage produced an additional trauma in him, and he transferred his anger towards Lily because she looked like her mother.

One of the most significant parts of the story is usually underrated by most literary critics. Something shifted inside of T. Ray when he says her daughter is going back with him: "Even as he said it, I could tell he didn't want me (...) Another part of him – the good part, if there was such a thing – might even be thinking that I'd be better off here" (Kidd: 368). The gravity of witnessing child abandonment does not shatter Lily's naiveté, as she still wants to have faith that he loves her in his own way (Kidd: 371). Despite the author's choice for restraining her maturity, she definitely matures because she chooses forgiveness. Moretti (1987) says the classical ending of a Bildungsroman novel presents a marriage, but family is also a social pact. In agreement with Liptak (2010), the Marian congregation provides a surrogate family for her showing she is worthy of love too. Now

Lily feels complete and not motherless anymore. The Daughters of Mary serve as several motherly figures in addition with the Black Madonna.

4.2. Lily's view of society

“I'd lived inside it the way a goldfish lives in its bowl, as if that was the only world there was. Leaving it would be the death of me” (Kidd: 309). The culmination of this analysis ends when the Wilhelm Meister changes his/her perspective on society. If a change of mind does not happen the plot fails, and the novel would not be considered a Bildungsroman. It is an essential part of the process of maturity. I divided the main sections of Lily's world into gender, race, religion and society's expected behaviour of each of those aspects.

Regarding gender, Lily grew up regarding coloured women unintelligent due to T. Ray's comments. She thought they could reach some level of intelligence but never surpassing her own white intelligence (Kidd: 97). Lily acknowledges the absurdity of believing intellect depends on skin colour (Kidd: 97) as August is a far more exceptional character than her in both education and emotional intelligence. In connection with society's expected behavior towards women, Lily is shocked to find three unmarried sisters living together (Kidd: 128). When August explains why she decided marriage was not an option for her, Lily understands women are expected to have a helpful domestic attitude as wives. Thus, she understands why the congregation backs up Sugar-Girl while she argued with her husband (Kidd: 331). It was about them not supporting Otis giving orders to his wife because they know events of such nature happened constantly. Even so, it could point towards other conclusions including domestic abuse.

In the middle of a service, Sugar-Girl offered to handcraft a hat for Lily so she can dress as the rest of the congregation. Then, Lily praises non-white women and thought about what the policeman said, that she downgrades herself for not staying in a house with a white family. She expresses why not comprehending African American women are placed in a better position in the social hierarchy (Kidd: 260). The main character needs to learn about American history and its social implications. Yet, at least she perceives the continuous inequality around her. The angle taken comes from living with the Other and comparing her life with them, and concluding they are not that different from each other.

In connection with Lily changing her perspective on men, Zachary plays a relevant part in this section. He is the only direct contact she has with a young African American man. Neil, June's husband, does not alter significantly Lily's thoughts. As mentioned before, she finds Zachary's intellect shocking and finds him attractive. He warns her some individuals may end his life for just looking at her (Kidd: 168). In 1955, according to Armstrong (2015), fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was killed in Mississippi for presumably whistling at a white woman. He says after he becomes a lawyer, he will find her and marry her (Kidd: 286). Lily and Zachary accept being together is not a possibility. Nevertheless, they hope they could be so when he improves his social class because in that way, at least they would face less backlash.

In regard to religion, she goes to church as a social act, but she doubts her faith. She questions whether she would enter heaven or hell in the afterlife (Kidd: 149). She has a hard time understanding why T. Ray goes to church while being an abusive father (Kidd: 4). Yet, she does not take her faith seriously until she joined The Daughters of Mary (Kidd: 356). August concludes *love* is Christianity's essence (Kidd: 358), which is what clearly lacks on T. Ray's behavior and is what Lily needs. If religion was not included in

the plot, Lily's healing would have been completely different. After August narrated what happened to Deborah, Lily acquired information never acquired before and it broke her down. However, faith provided a sense of fulfillment and purpose. By resolving her past trauma alone, as an act of maturation, it would not have been enough for her to heal.

Lastly, race is the crucial element that changes Lily's perspective about society in general. Lily tells August why she saved Rosaleen even though it was illegal; leaving her at the hospital would have meant a fatal end for her housekeeper. She would feel as responsible as the ones who violently hit her (Kidd: 297). The process went from understanding racism to knowing the extreme actions of hate. "At my school they made fun of colored people's lips and noses. I myself had laughed at these jokes, hoping to fit in. Now I (...) would tell them how wrong we'd all been" (Kidd: 145). The important factor to highlight are her social circles. Until she runs away from her known world, she does not meet other African Americans to believe otherwise about them. She grew up in a racist and classist environment, thus she never questioned another truth. After Sugar-Girl's hat offering during service (Kidd: 260), she ceases to feel odd due to her whiteness. I consider this last event as evidence of how her awakening process came to an end. She does not feel superior anymore, but as equal as the African American community.

It took a long process for Lily to change her engrained mild racism. In chapter eight, when someone turned on the radio she hears about demonstrations in favor of enforcing the Civil Rights Act (Kidd: 206). In order to answer why the American South had a hard time with inclusivity and equality, a political angle needs to be unfolded. The main character mirrors some aspects of this issue which consists of many layers. She hears about the Act through television (Kidd: 25). The new gadget was crucial to communicate to the North what was happening in the South, especially to witness the beating of non-violent civil rights protesters (Verney, 200: 60). Due to this constant

information, the North criticized the South even more and Northerners decided to raise their voice:

“In Sylvan we’d had a rumor at the first of the summer about a busload of people from New York City showing up to integrate the city pool. Talk about a panic. We had a citywide emergency on our hands, as there is no greater affliction for the southern mind than people up north coming down to fix our way of life” (Kidd: 193).

The recent passage remarks the South has a different social structure from the North. At the beginning of the story, Lily regards the state of New York as a foreign country because race was not much of an issue there (Kidd: 15). T. Ray and the main villains of the story embody the term “white trash”. They are poor, uneducated, usually prejudiced, white Southerners, often considered a forgotten class of American society in history. Lockley (1997) estimates around 70 to 75 percent of the white population in the antebellum South were non-slave owners. They could not afford to possess slaves. Therefore, after the Thirteenth Amendment their lifestyle had merely a better quality than the recently designated African Americans citizens, the former slaves, as both of these parties usually had to work together. Consequently, there was a resentment against those, whites and African Americans who lived better in the North.

“Buck’s belief that the racial ties that existed between non-slaveholding whites and the white elite was the gel which held Southern society together in defense of slavery” (Buck 1925, cited in Lockley 1997: 58-59). I maintain the sixties South was opposed to progress because they had a mentality inherited from the antebellum era. In such period of time they were against the Thirteenth Amendment, in the sixties they were against the Act of 1964. The connection between class and race further complicates the situation. In the South, a middle-class African American was perceived in a better light than a poor white citizen. The reason behind such thought, was the weakening of white supremacy if non-whites had a better upward mobility (Lockley: 67). It was

unconceivable that white individuals, who represented the majority of the population and the ruling class, would end up in the lowest position of the social hierarchy. They were supposed to keep themselves in the elite. This group of “white trash” became the source of Southern and national shame.

Lily noticed since President Johnson signed the Act, the nation was divided (Kidd: 109). As Isenberg (2017) narrates the sixties, what differentiates Lyndon B. Johnson from his Democratic predecessor were the measures of the Great Society. Even though he “had a proven record as a New Dealer and modern progressive, on the national stage he was still regarded as a regional [Texan] figure” (Isenberg: 232). President Johnson had to appear a progressive man to the North since the reputation of his home state followed him. In addition, he had to sympathize with the South because he needed their votes. I assume this is the essence of the fight for equality in American society. If constitutional changes must be approved on a national level, the majority of both parts of the country should agree on those changes.

I agree with the author about the need of images of unity and inclusion (Schlumpf 2003). In the present case, the image of the Black Madonna undermines the white supremacist narrative of the past that shapes power dynamics in the present (Trodd: 2020). It takes an extensive research to study a society within a period to judge social actions. Lily could see a shift happening for justice. Through living among the Other, she witnessed their struggles and how change was much needed.

To conclude, in light of recent events I cannot finish this project without addressing the current second wave of the Black Lives Matter movement. I do not want to forget the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and the rest of thousands of others the media is not diffusing enough. The continuous wrongful death of these souls by police brutality has reached the culmination of anger of the African American community. The

riots across the American nation resonate with the violence documented after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. The White House recalled the First Amendment gives the right to peacefully assemble and not to burn down buildings, looting, deface property and assault the police force. However, those words come from a predominantly white administration disconnected from acts of hate driven by racism. The many peacefully demonstrations have been attacked by both the police and violent groups. Protesters had to fight back to protect their own lives. The several acts of vandalism by protestors are the outcome of oppression by a racist system that does not condemn, and even supports the aggressor. As a young student there is only so much I can do through the present work, educating myself and raising my voice through my circles. Hopefully one day I will be in a position of influence that will allow me to ease the perpetual burden of injustice.

5. Conclusion

The present work has discussed the society of the American South in the sixties. First through a review of two legal cases: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* and the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964. Then, the ineffective power of those two constitutional changes in society. I used *The Secret Life of Bees* as a prime example to understand why. Its main character, Lily Owens, acknowledges her own racism and ultimately accepts the Other. I called this process “awakening of racial awareness”. It consists of acknowledging unfair situations and realizing what it means having black and white skin in a social context.

Kidd uses the Black Madonna as a symbol to bridge Lily’s personal journey to her awakening. As religion is an important segment in her life, witnessing for the first time a dark Mary will profoundly change her perspective on society and gender. The motherhood void she always felt since childhood is fulfilled, which is a crucial healthy step in her maturation process. Consequently, she can comprehend the fatal events of Deborah Owens through both her parents’ perspective.

By a thorough review of history, law, gender, religion and education in the sixties, it is now easier to understand why racism is still such a significant issue in the United States. Even though by looking back criticizing white citizens seems an easy conclusion, to awaken racially and to stand up against the majority of a territory was not an easy process to go through. Nevertheless, it was a phenomenon that at some level happened and is worthy of research.

Lastly, I suggest further research about images left out in history. In particular within Christianity, to rewrite their main figures’ hypothetical ethnic origins and to show a different Mary in the media. These measures would change the perspective of minorities. In addition, I suggest the continuous production of literature of social protest nowadays. They can devalue racism by writing stories similarly to Lily’s.

Plot summary and main characters

For those readers not acquainted with the plot of the novel, Lily is a fourteen-year old white girl living in South Carolina. She is the only child of T. Ray and the late Deborah Owens. Lily accidentally killed her mother when she was infant and such tragedy produces an emotionally wound in her. After enduring abusive years from T. Ray, the main character runs away with their African American housekeeper, Rosaleen, to the fictional city of Tiburon, South Carolina. They followed an address at the back of a Black Madonna photograph which belonged to her mother, without knowing what or who they were going to find out. Eventually, they find the same picture in honey jars of a store. The clerk informs Lily the honey business belongs to August Boatwright. She and her sisters, June and May host Lily and Rosaleen in their home because they have nowhere to stay. During their stop, they learn about the cult held to the Black Madonna.

Lily meets Zachary, an aspiring young student of law and also a friend and an assistant to August's honey business. Zachary is arrested because he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. By the same lines, Rosaleen is a fugitive because her registering process went wrong. Social events of such nature change Lily's perspective about society. Lastly, T. Ray finds her runaway daughter and they confront each other. The allegedly truth from her mother is revealed and he abandons her to the care of the Boatwright sisters.

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